

Michelle Huang, "Rematerializations of Race," *Lateral* 6.1 (2017).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L6.1.11>

This content is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. Copyright is retained by authors.

Forum: Emergent Critical Analytics for Alternative Humanities

Issue 6.1 (Spring 2017)

New Materialist Philosophy

## Rematerializations of Race

**Michelle N Huang**

**ABSTRACT** Response to Kyla Wazana Tompkins, "On the Limits and Promise of New Materialist Philosophy," published in *Lateral* 5.1. Huang reassesses the methodological implications of new materialisms by grappling with renewed attention to form in literary studies to articulate the varying processes by which racial difference becomes elided, rematerialized, and remade.

In November 2016, I attended an excellent panel at the annual Society for Literature, Science, and the Arts (SLSA) conference in Atlanta on the topic of heterodox science.<sup>1</sup> During the Q&A, one presenter, whose work situates UFOs within U.S. Cold War politics, was asked a question that in part queried if "she really believed in UFOs." The audience laughed, and once the chuckles had subsided, the presenter replied that it was convenient that they could quickly answer "no," while still affirming the intellectual value of pursuing such a project. I understood the presenter's point. Yet at the same time (and as the presenter themselves acknowledged), such a disavowal reinforces the very values of scientific objectivity and distance their work seeks to challenge. Such questions of belief and nonbelief are even more fraught in relation to race, gender, sexuality, disability, and other axes of embodied difference. And so I was stung by the revelation that despite knowing that race is a mutable fiction that is socially and materially distributed through networks of power, I could never say, even for a moment, that I do not "believe in race." As a junior scholar working on the imbrications of scientific discourse with Asian American racialization, I want to refuse any Manichean question—of belief or nonbelief—that leaves a contained and singular definition of race intact. Instead, the great opportunity of New Materialism seems to lie, as Kyla Wazana Tompkins suggests in her pithy and provocative piece "On the Limits and Promise of New Materialist Philosophy," in pressuring *how* we understand what race *is*.<sup>2</sup>

This opportunity is still yet to be realized, as race remains underrepresented in the scholarship of New Materialism as well as in the bodies of those working within this sundry field. What results from this lack of representation are, unsurprisingly, too-quick dismissals of "representationalism," which as Tompkins argues, manifest as:

the ongoing citation of "the power of language" or "representationalism" as a problem that is corrected by new materialism, as well as . . . loose and vague references to "identitarian thinking" or "identity politics" as a failure to ground and create productive political thought.<sup>3</sup>

In the domain of literary studies, her words offer a necessary reminder that collapsing the politics of difference into a teleology that amounts to "less representational=more radical=more better" serves no one, least of all minoritized constituencies whose creative experiments have always been disqualified as insufficiently imaginative or aesthetically-

minded. What is being represented has never been limited to the “real” experiences of minoritized peoples; it has always also been about how dividing practices of epistemology delineate worlds, cut (white, male) humans from (non-white, female, queer, disabled, animal) nonhumans, and disarticulate humans from their environments.

The question I want to explore in this brief piece is the following: What are the implications of New Materialism for literary analysis, a methodology so focused on the concretization of form? How might we revise our reading practices, tied as they are to sedimented notions of form, character, setting, and narrative progression? The implications of New Materialism for literary analysis have just begun to be explored, and, consequently, revisiting literary form is both counterintuitive and crucial. While such a return might seem to re-privilege language and representationalism in the manner critiqued by New Materialism, it is a necessary step towards engendering more comprehensive revision of privileged modes of reading and literary interpretation. Put simply, the critical pressure that New Materialist thinking exerts on existing epistemologies of being requires a concomitant reformulation of methodology, lest we reinscribe the same hegemonic terms of art. In my own areas of interest, feminist science studies and Asian American literary studies, I’ve been particularly inspired by the recent work of scholars such as Stacy Alaimo, Elizabeth Wilson, Rachel Lee, Rebekah Sheldon, and Aimee Bahng.<sup>4</sup> Their work, which insists on material embodiment while redefining the boundaries of the human, invites further exploration to re-materialize the aesthetic, to recall its definition as the “science of perception.”<sup>5</sup> As Tompkins quotes Dana Luciano, “The most compelling contribution of the new materialisms is not conceptual or analytic, strictly speaking, but *sensory*. The attempt to attend to the force of liveliness of matter will entail not just a reawakening or redirection of critical attention, but a reorganizing of the senses.”<sup>6</sup>

Following Tompkins following Luciano, we might root the experimental power of language in its challenge to our sensory-perceptual apparatus. As a graduate student housed in an English department, with all the disciplinary baggage that entails, I am interested in how New Materialism can aid literary scholars in modifying interpretive practices to articulate more precisely *how* the discursive is emphatically material. Such examinations, and their concomitant recalibrations of literary analysis, could potentially do much to reconcile the divide between the representational and deconstructionist modes of feminist, critical race, queer, disability, and animal theory.



Photo from: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB122227270204871529>

To speculate about how such a New Materialist reading practice might proceed, I turn to John Yau's 2012 poem, "Confessions of a Recycled Shopping Bag."<sup>2</sup> Yau, a student of John Ashbery, is a prolific poet whose relationship to his racial identity has been contentiously discussed in the poetry community. One flashpoint of particular note is a 1994 feud in which, after Yau criticized Eliot Weinberger's 1993 anthology *American Poetry Since 1950: Innovators and Outsiders* as narrow in terms of both representation and selection criteria, Weinberger castigated Yau as "creat[ing] a remarkable new persona for himself: that of the angry outsider 'person of color.'"<sup>8</sup> The fallout of the confrontation persisted long after the initial clash: in 2007, Al Filreis revived it by proclaiming "Yau doesn't have a political bone in his body and nothing really explains his attack (unless, as Weinberger hints, Yau had just lost his sanity)."<sup>2</sup>

Filreis's problematic reinscription of racial politics inside a poet's body evinces an ongoing confusion about what race is, and where it is located. So I chose this Yau poem as a thought experiment, as it is ostensibly about a self-contained object and contains no overt markers of race. A frequent first reaction to works such as "Confessions" is the demand for proof that the text being examined is "about" race. Incoming American Studies Association president Kandice Chuh excoriates such "aboutness" in her Winter 2014 *Social Text* piece, "It's Not about Anything," where she argues that:

aboutness functions as an assessment of relevance, and within the racialized economy of academic knowledge (canonical knowledge reproducing whiteness continues to center the US academy and thus ensures that higher education maintain its long tradition of contributing to the reproduction of social inequality), preserves the (racist) epistemologies of (neo)liberalism through a reproductive logic that is utterly unqueer.<sup>10</sup>

Demands for “aboutness” at their core misapprehend what race is; in order to shore up what Tompkins alludes to as the fantasy of “the atomic nature of the self,”<sup>11</sup> they compartmentalize, stabilize, and concretize what are distributed and multifarious phenomena. Further, I am deeply concerned about how “aboutness” reifies the belief in a master molecule for race—in our genomic age, DNA—by seeking something tangible, stable, and solid that can be definitively identified as “race.” Instead of capitulating to aboutness, I am asking how Yau’s poem presents an opportunity to think about how Asian American racialization is produced, circulated, and perceived (which is emphatically different than the poem being “about” race).

The subject of “Confessions” is multiply derivative. First, a recycled shopping bag is an auxiliary commodity product whose value inheres in gathering and containing other commodities. Second, recycled shopping bags are only important because of plastic bags.<sup>12</sup> The wayward plastic bag was imprinted in cultural memory by *American Beauty* in 1999 and then immortalized by Katy Perry’s crooning “Do you ever feel / like a plastic bag / drifting through the wind / wanting to start again?” in the opening lines to her 2010 hit song “Firework.” The plastic bag also looms large in contemporary environmental consciousness, and as such provides the cover image for the art book of the 2014 art exhibition *Petroleum Manga* organized and illustrated by environmental artist Marina Zurkow, and is the target of a growing number of bans worldwide (in the United States, most notably in California).<sup>13</sup>

Yau’s poem, so short and sardonic as to render it doggerel, is below in full:

## Confessions of a Recycled Shopping Bag

I used to be a plastic bottle

I used to be scads of masticated wattle

I used to be epic spittle, aka septic piddle

I used to be a pleasant colleague

I used to be a radiant ingredient

I used to be a purple polyethylene pony

I used to be a phony upload project

I used to be a stony blue inhalant

I used to be a family-size turquoise bottle

I used to be a domesticated pink bubble

I used to be a pleasant red colleague

I used to be a beaming cobalt emollient

I used to be a convenient chartreuse antidepressant

Yau's Confessions of a Recycled Shopping Bag

The third derivation lies in the poem's appropriation of the conventions of confessional poetry, especially its autobiographical "I." "Confessions" puts parodic pressure on the presumed self-importance of such an "I" by housing it in a denigrated commodity product. The anaphoric repetition "I used to be" conjures up a washed up country singer, a has-been. It also suggests the end of utility, as in "I [was] used to be." A different function and identity for each previous incarnation. The harsh doubling of consonants—"bottle," "wattle," "spittle," "piddle," and "colleague"—violently cleaves the words into two syllables, lending a machinic, punctuated, quality of production to the lines.<sup>14</sup>

Such fragmentation of the lyric-I suggests that reading the speaker as a singular persona is inadequate; the recycled shopping bag's lyric-I is distributed across space, time, and form in a manner that is more insidious than capacious. The poem is an example of what Charles Bernstein refers to as "sprung lyric," which "stands between the sentence-driven and discursive drives of the new prose-format poems and the traditional I-centered free verse lyric of personal sincerity or epiphany."<sup>15</sup> "I" is a container, like the recycled shopping bag, of these various colors, products, and objects, both human and nonhuman, but one whose various transmutations are only visible once narrated. The undeviating

opening of each line contrasts with their variegated closings, stressing the inflexibility and immovability of “I” while simultaneously undermining what “I” comprises.<sup>16</sup> The multiple scales of the recycled shopping bag’s former lives—chemical, human, digital—are not so much a democratic horizontalization of things than a mocking invitation to think about what transactions of capitalist production bring them together in mean coincidence. What racialized and gendered forms of labor are absented and made invisible by our obdurate focus on “I”?

I will close with the vivid colors of the poem—purple, blue, turquoise, pink, red, cobalt, and garish chartreuse. The repeated insistence on assigning colors to the objects makes color a significant characteristic where it might not be otherwise; it’s worth noting that the collection the poem hails from is called *Further Adventures in Monochrome*. And here’s where the poem can help us think about racial logics of identification. Colorism is inextricable from racialism; the overdetermined visual epistemology of race is tied to melanin and skin color.<sup>17</sup> If one mundane object can have been so many colors, then the poem suggests the banal mechanism of racial identification is less an essential characteristic than one repeatedly transformed through various different means of production. Furthermore, the poem’s attribution of psychological adjectives to the colors—beaming, domesticated, phony, pleasant—reminds us that colors possess affective qualities that make us feel, or qualia. Such intersubjective broaching is that with which, Tompkins posits, object-oriented ontology cannot contend:

In the OOO conversation, matter can never be apprehended as such: it comes into legibility only as form. In this way, OOO is extraneous to the conversations taking place in feminist, queer, and critical race theory, most of which take as true the idea that the relationship between discursivity and materiality is circular and, in Karen Barad’s terms, intra-active.<sup>18</sup>

As feminist theory’s signal insights on the subject/object divide remind us, there is still matter and meaning between objects and forms. The difficulty of perceiving such material entanglements does not make them any less animating or powerful. New Materialist understandings about the contingency of human form are productive not because they move us “beyond” race (they don’t, and never will), but because they make visible how race is always embedded within the production of the cultural forms used to fabricate the human. To believe in race is to believe in racial formation as synthetic and syncretic, to percept that race traverses disciplinary boundaries, and to trace its material-semiotic links to places where it no longer seems to be “about” race at all. But most importantly, it is to understand that race is not something that resides only in the human outlines of raced bodies. There is no master molecule of race; following race all the way down means, per Donna Haraway, staying with the troubled concatenations of desire and matter that will always exceed our ability to capture and contain them.<sup>19</sup>

### Acknowledgements

Thank you to Christopher A. Eng and Amy K. King for the invitation to write a response and their editorial guidance.

### Notes

1. “On Heterodox Science: Anarchy, Creativity, Facticity” (conference panel, Society for Literature, Science, and the Arts national conference, Atlanta, GA, November 4, 2016). [↗](#)
2. Kyla Wazana Tompkins, “On the Limits and Promise of New Materialist Philosophy,” *Lateral* 5, no. 1 (2016), <http://csalateral.org/wp/issue/5-1/forum-alt-humanities->

3. Ibid. ↗
4. Here I'm only adding to Tompkins's robust bibliography, but most pointedly I'm thinking of Stacy Alaimo, "Thinking as the Stuff of the World," conclusion in *Exposed: Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 169–188; Aimee Bahng, "Specters of the Pacific: Salt Fish Drag and Atomic Hauntologies in the Era of Genetic Modification," *Journal of American Studies* 49, no. 4 (2015): 663–683; Rachel C. Lee, *The Exquisite Corpse of Asian America: Biopolitics, Biosociality, and Posthuman Ecologies* (New York: NYU Press, 2014); Rebekah Sheldon, "Form/Matter/Chora: Object-Oriented Ontology and Feminist New Materialism," in *The Nonhuman Turn*, ed. Richard Grusin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015): 193–222; and Elizabeth A. Wilson, *Gut Feminism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015). ↗
5. "aesthetic, n. and adj.," OED Online. Oxford University Press. ↗
6. Tompkins, "On the Limits"; emphasis added. ↗
7. John Yau, "Confessions of a Recycled Shopping Bag," in *Further Adventures in Monochrome* (Seattle, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2012), 22. See also <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/56542>. Hereafter referred to as "Confessions." ↗
8. Since this quarrel is not the focus of my inquiry, for more detail, refer to Dorothy Wang, *Thinking Its Presence: Form, Race, and Subjectivity in Contemporary Asian American Poetry* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 170–176. ↗
9. Al Filreis, "Neither Us Nor Them, Part 2," *Jacket2*, September 23, 2007, <http://jacket2.org/commentary/neither-us-nor-them-part-2>. I don't need to defend Yau, as he does so quite well himself, most recently in John Yau, "'Purity' and the 'Avant Garde,'" *Boston Review*, April 29, 2015, <http://bostonreview.net/poetry/john-yau-purity-avant-garde>. ↗
10. Kandice Chuh, "It's Not About Anything," *Social Text* 32, no. 4 (2014): 127. ↗
11. Tompkins, "On the Limits." ↗
12. As noted in a recent "Object Lesson" essay on tote bags as a response to the plastic bag, the allure of anti-plastic is so strong that in 2007 a rush on the "I'm not a plastic bag" cotton totes designed by Anya Hindmarch for Whole Foods resulted in 30 people being hospitalized in Taiwan. Noah Dillon, "Are Tote Bags Really Good for the Environment?" *Atlantic*, September 2, 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2016/09/to-tote-or-note-to-tote/498557/>. ↗
13. Marina Zurkow and Valerie Vogrin, eds. *The Petroleum Manga* (New York: Punctum Books, 2014). ↗
14. Yau is not the only Asian American writer whose work has personified plastic—as I've written elsewhere, Ken Liu and Frank Chin also do in ways that highlight the plasticity of Asian American racial formation. See Michelle N. Huang, "Ecologies of Entanglement in the Great Pacific Garbage Patch," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 20, no. 1 (February 2017): 95–117. ↗
15. Charles Bernstein, "The Expanded Field of  $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ " in *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*, ed. Joe Bray, Alison Gibbons, and Brian McHale (New York: Routledge, 2012): 281–297; Michael Leong, "Neo-Surrealism's Forked Tongue: Reflections on the Dramatic Monologue, Politics, and Community in the Recent Poetry of Will Alexander and John Yau," *Contemporary Literature* 55, no.

3 (Fall 2014): 501–533. Leong’s incisive reading of “double embodiment” in Yau’s work helpfully highlights the body as a key concept in need of further excavation. [↗](#)

16. Here I’m thinking of item 2 on Tompkins’s list of examples for the uses of New Materialism for American Studies, Ethnic Studies, and Queer Theory: “the interrogation of mythologies of liberal personhood and sovereign agency by foregrounding the human body’s autonomic ‘prior-ness’ to the social world allows for new avenues of political critique; however, dissolving the atomic nature of the self by thinking through bodily affect as collective and social is a political move towards collectivization and distributive agency that should be key.” Tompkins, “On the Limits.” [↗](#)
17. See also Joseph Jonghyun Jeon’s chapter “Reflections of Things: Ekphrasis and Racial Iconology in Cathy Song and John Yau” in *Racial Things, Racial Forms: Objecthood in Avant-Garde Asian American Poetry* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012), 109–142. [↗](#)
18. Tompkins, “On the Limits.” [↗](#)
19. Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 1–8. [↗](#)

[Bio](#)



#### Michelle N Huang

Michelle N. Huang is a dual-degree Ph.D. candidate in the Departments of English and Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at the Pennsylvania State University. Her dissertation, defended in May 2017, explores posthumanist aesthetics in twentieth and twenty-first century Asian American literature and culture. Michelle’s articles have appeared in *Twentieth-Century Literature*, *Journal of Asian American Studies*, *Amerasia*, *Journal of Medical Humanities*, and online at *Post45: Contemporaries*. In Fall 2017, she will be Assistant Professor of English and Asian American Studies at Northwestern University.

